

To all of you—parents, teachers, social workers, nurses, psychologists, and also uncles, aunts, grandparents, after-school carers, and everyone who supports a child who is going through a challenging time:

There is no question that our children are growing up in a difficult period. Every time comes with its own challenges. The problems children face today are not worse or more difficult than in the past—they are simply different.

Because many children carry their phones everywhere, and often learn right away about upsetting details when something happens, their feelings can be harmed. They do not need to experience everything firsthand.

Stress in children's lives

In her book *Children Under Stress*, Ylva Ellneby presents a stress scale to understand how much stress children experience. There is also a great deal of research on what stress can do to children's lives.

Research suggests that merely seeing distressing news is sufficient. It can impact children's emotions in the same way as if they had lived through the event themselves.

Stress can have many causes, but some of the most common are:

- Violence or war
- Bullying or social pressure within a group
- Arguments and conflicts
- Parental separation or divorce
- Loss of a loved one (family member, pet, etc.)
- Absence of parents
- Health problems, accidents, or a hospital stay
- Poverty (sometimes there is not enough food or clothing, or there is no bed to sleep in)
- Financial difficulties
- Problems with body image and self-esteem
- School-related difficulties and pressure
- Illness or a hospital stay of a sibling or friend
- Lack of movement / physical activity

Resilienz

Most children find ways to cope with difficult situations. Some do so in healthy ways, others in less healthy ways, or even ways that can be harmful. In our view, stressful and burdening situations should always be taken seriously and addressed.

Children are naturally creative and it often feels harder to put into words what is happening inside them.

If you have the opportunity to support a child through this process, use this book as a guide. If you are unsure what the next step should be, ask the child where they would like to go. In every person, many answers are already there, trust this process.

Solution-Focused art therapy LOM® offers a unique method for processing experiences and reducing stress through painting with metaphors.

Why drawing can help with stress — Background on LOM®

LOM® (Solution-Oriented Art Therapy) is based on the idea that the human brain thinks primarily in pictures and processes information through inner images. Studies suggest that around 60% of what we think is made up of visual images, images that organize memories, emotions, and cognitive processes.

During the active process of painting, these stored images can be changed and given new meanings. Unlike other art-therapy approaches, the paintings are not interpreted. The focus is exclusively on developing a solution-focused perspective, which can reduce the emotional impact of burdensome memories.

If, during the creative process, the emotional meaning of a memory shifts, the body's physiological response also changes: stress hormones decrease, the autonomic nervous system is relieved, and the body's alarm reactions can quiet down.

A key role is played by the **amygdala** (also called the “almond nucleus”). It is a small part of the brain within the limbic system and acts like the brain's **alarm center**. It reacts very quickly, but often inaccurately, by linking current situations with emotional patterns from earlier traumatic experiences. This often leads to an overactivation of the survival mode.

LOM® addresses this by working with simple, clear, and harmless metaphors. This helps avoid triggering a stress response and gives time for the **prefrontal cortex** to correctly place what happened in time and space.

In this way, the stress and trauma can be integrated into a more coherent, less overwhelming memory.

So, the internally “negatively imprinted” image is essentially **rewritten**, and then drawn again in a new, safe form.

When things need to happen quickly: How to support with LOM®

There are situations in life where words no longer reach us. This can happen not only to children, but also to adults.

When the stress response is activated, stress hormones are in the bloodstream, and we “dissolve” into our own world, flooded by emotions. As mentioned above: at that point, words usually do not help, because thinking becomes shut down.

Here is how you can de-escalate the situation and help yourself or the child return to the real world:

A simple exercise

Choose an activity from the workbook “Paint Your Way Forward”, e.g., “My feelings” (p. 13).

- Sit down with the child at a table in a quiet corner.
- Read the instructions together.

By taking the child seriously, listening to them, and being fully present, you **co-regulate** their nervous system, helping them feel inner calm again.

How to support the child while drawing

You can support the child in the following way:

- **Be fully with the child.**
- Encourage them with **gentle guidance** to draw **slowly**.
- Stay focused on the image yourself and watch with interest as it is created.
- If needed, gently bring their attention back to the picture again and again.
- The metaphor should be drawn **as large as possible** and fill the whole page.
- The metaphor should be drawn **clearly and simply**.

Because the child must concentrate on drawing, they return to the “**here and now.**” Stress hormones like **adrenaline and cortisol** are processed and the child calms down.

If questions come up

If the child asks questions, try to answer honestly.

Once the metaphor has been painted (from inside out), let the child choose a color for the background. This color should support the image. Then the background is drawn slowly, too.

For the brain, the meaning is:

Slow drawing: *No danger*

Fast drawing: *Danger*

Additional simple metaphor ideas

Below you will find more supportive, easy metaphor prompts that you can create together with a child on different topics.

Examples:

- If this problem were a **balloon**, what color would it be?
- If your anger / overwhelming feeling were an **ice cream**, what would it look like?
- If the pain you feel right now were a **candy**, what color would it be?
- If this “uneasy” feeling you have right now were a **mushroom**, what would it look like?
- If what you can’t describe were a **toy**, what toy would it be?
- If what you can’t say were a **rubber boot**, what would it look like?
- If what you saw were a **ball**, what would it look like?
- If (describe the problem) were a (metaphor from the list below), what would it be, and what color would it have?

Possible and easy-to-paint Metaphors

- **Apple**
- **Ball** (game ball / soccer ball / shuttlecock)
- **Donut** (first paint the beige ring, then the icing and decoration (Smarties, sprinkles, etc.)
- **Ice cream**

- **Rubber boot**
- **Potato**
- **Button**
- **Balloon** (white string should be painted straight down)
- **Easter egg**
- **Stone**
- **Elf / little helper**

Note: These metaphor images are meant as a **short intervention** when everything is “too much” and you can also use them for yourself.

Drawing for yourself as the caregiver

If you feel stressed yourself, can't think clearly anymore, or feel upset, take a sheet of paper and paint a metaphor from above.

Idea for schools, waiting rooms...



(A small emergency kit built from a wooden box filled with A6 cards and a few colored wax crayons.)

We wish you, and your child you are supporting, many moments of calm and joy while painting.

Coping with difficult situations does not have to remain impossible. If you need further help and support, we recommend training, courses, or a direct visit with a LOM® therapist.

With warm regards,

Rahel Brügger, Barbara Carnielli with Kathrin Bigler

For caregivers using the workbook „Paint Your Way Forward”– Navigate Anxiety, Stress, and big Emotions
by Rahel Brügger and Barbara Carnielli

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Courses and Trainings:

<https://www.LOM-international.org>

<https://www.arttherapy.dk/professionals>